



Penang

TELEPHONE CODE 04 / POPULATION 1.47 MILLION / AREA 1031 SQ KM

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Best Places to Stay

- » Clove Hall (p163)
- » Straits Collection (p160)
- » Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion (p160)
- » Eastern & Oriental Hotel (p160)

Best Places to Eat

- » Hawker Centres (p167)
- » Teik Sen (p163)
- » Casise (p168)
- » Amelie (p164)

Why Go?

'Pearl of the Orient', Penang's nickname, conjures romantic images of trishaws pedalling past watermarked Chinese shophouses, blue joss smoke and a sting of chilli in the air; or maybe it's ornate temples, and gold-embroidered saris displayed in shop windows, next to mosques sending a call to the midday prayer; but really, whatever you're imagining, chances are that Penang *is* that reality. Add surprises like slick cafes, antiseptic shopping malls, jungles and white beaches and you'll have an even sharper image.

Historically, Penang was the waterway between Asia's two halves and the outlet to the markets of Europe and the Middle East. As such, the island straddles the juncture of Asia's great kingdoms and colonial empires. Today the culture of this region, forged over decades of colonialism, commercial activity, hosting tourists and preserving backyards, is one of Malaysia's most tolerant, cosmopolitan and exciting, especially on the palate.

When to Go?

Penang is best during its festivals and luckily you're likely to hit one at almost any time of the year. The best are Thaipusam, Chinese New Year, the Hungry Ghosts Festival and Deepavali, all which draw crowds and max out the lively volume on the streets till it makes you dizzy.

The Georgetown Festival, celebrating Penang's Unesco World Heritage status, is also poised to be an annual event lighting up the entire month of July with theatre, dance music and anything that shows off the city's multidimensional culture.

History

Little is known of Penang's early history. Chinese seafarers were aware of the island, which they called Betelnut Island, as far back as the 15th century, but it appears to have been uninhabited. It wasn't until the early 1700s that colonists arrived from Sumatra and established settlements at Batu Uban and the area now covered by south-

ern Georgetown. The island came under the control of the sultan of Kedah, but in 1771 the sultan signed the first agreement with the British East India Company handing them trading rights in exchange for military assistance against Siam.

Fifteen years later Captain Francis Light, on behalf of the East India Company, took possession of Penang, which was formally



Penang Highlights

- 1 Dining on the fabulous array of **hawker food** (p167)
- 2 Exploring the outrageously ornate **Kho Kongsi** (p150)
- 3 Hiking through jungles to monkey beaches at **Penang National Park** (p177)
- 4 Sun-tanning and cocktail drinking at a resort in **Batu Ferringhi** (p180)
- 5 Understanding the meaning of Feng Shui at the **Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion** (p152)
- 6 Climbing to the top of **Kek Lok Si Temple** (p175) to the 36.5m-high bronze Kuan Yin statue
- 7 Enjoying the cool breezes and views from atop **Penang Hill** (p174)
- 8 Eating curry and sari shopping in raucous **Little India** (p154)